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## Women of Afghan: A Critical Study of Khaled Hosseini's Selected Novels

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Khaled Hosseini captures the politics of Afghanistan in his first two novels: *A Thousand Splendid Suns* and *The Kite Runner*. This paper interrogates the woman's question in Afghan under the rule of Taliban. It also attempts to locate a woman's position within the larger framework of Islam while illustrating it with the novels. The article further aims to question the violence perpetrated by the Puritanic forces, while it also connects the text with other testimonies. It focuses on women's rights not as a feminist question, but more as a concern for human rights.

“O womenfolk, if you know the rights that your husband have over you, everyone of you would wipe the dust from her husband's feet with her face.” (Al-Hashimi)

Throughout the history, Islamic women have been an embodiment of oppression and violence. As they call woman the “second sex”, women in Afghan are doubly outcaste: one, as a woman, two, as woman of Islam. Women getting murdered, raped, looted, ostracized is a common sight in the country like Afghan. Particularly, the post- Taliban era brought home the onslaught of patriarchy and “Islamic laws” in their full form. Women, then, became the archetype of the Taliban “values and customs”, which were essentially bathed in blood.

The veil ('burqa'), child marriage, wife, daughter and sister beating, rape, female circumcision, slavery, polygamy ----all these merrily constitute the Islam laws. Several questions crop up, especially in the mind of the West, since such brutal and heinous crimes are treated with stringent laws and tough penalizing. Moreover, the idea of the 'burqa' is often debatable. Do women wear it only out of fear of patriarchy or does it comfort them? Or do they feel constrained within the burqa or are they liberated within their own space? This paper is an attempt to bring forth the plight of the women in both during the Afghan history, through Khaled Hosseini's novels *A Thousand Splendid Suns* and *The Kite Runner*. I shall also respond to the notion of the “gender apartheid” i.e. women not only as oppressed by patriarchy or the laws of Taliban, but are becoming “targets of the new kind of war. (Sima Wali)

Till the 1920s, the women had the right to move out unveiled, also had access to education. Times have changed drastically in terms of politics, and thus the social culture. Hosseini portrays the situation in both the novels. It is only after he met and talked to some women during his visit to Afghan, he decides to write his second novel, *A Thousand Splendid Suns*. While the first one was the product of “I feel like a tourist in my own country”. (54) In his later work, the author empathizes with his native women who are haunted by the Soviets, the Mujahideens and the Taliban. The entire novel maps out the forty-five years of history of Afghan, from the 1970s to post 9/11. It smudges the personal with the political and the historical. The struggle of Mariam and Laila is a testimony of the living, day-to-day tussle of the women during the unanticipated political tyranny. *A Thousand Splendid Suns* brings forth the agony of the women who are “tired

of being an instrument, of being lied to, laid claim to, used.” (10) Mariam is a character who suffers the fate of being a “harami”, an illegitimate girl child in an Islamic country. Right from her childhood, she’s deprived of the basic rights that a young girl is supposed to enjoy. She’s fond of going to school, but Nana tells her there’s “Only one skill. And it’s this: *tahamul*. Endure.”(18) Certainly, she disciples Nana’s word and endures throughout her life. She endures Jalil’s humiliation, Rasheed’s violence and people’s branding her a “harami”. Only with the companionship of Laila, she dares to assert her rights. Laila, on the other hand, learns to endure with experience. She is a better educated woman, comes from a background of a liberal and modern mindset and cannot tolerate the unnecessary baggage of “customs”. Mariam and Laila are the characters of the author’s imagination. Perhaps, he perceives a better future for women in real Afghan through his portrayal of these two women.

Further, the conception of burqa is a significant marker of the physical supervision of patriarchy over the women. Rasheed, in the novel, makes a point to both Mariam and Laila to take care of their “nang and namoos”(the honor and pride associated with a woman’s body). For him, “a woman’s face is her husband’s business only” (70) However, for Mariam, initially it was a suffocating experience. Later, though, “She learned to her surprise, was also comforting” (73) One needs to dig into the reason for her “comfort”. It is justified by her very next statement: “She no longer worried that people knew, with a single glance, all the shameful secrets of her past” (73) The veil pleased her since it would hide her identity of being a bastard daughter. Also, she feels “prized by his protectiveness” (81) The veil not only thus is a physical idea of subjugation of women, in fact; it becomes deeply-rooted in the woman’s psyche. The burqa becomes another mode of “protecting the honor” for Mariam. While Laila is comforted within the burqa since it is the only space of shelter to her. She has no other choice but to succumb to the orders of Rasheed. Also, “she wouldn’t be recognized this way if she ran into an old acquaintance of hers.”(232) As for Mariam, the burqa is a means to conceal her present identity. Although the two women find themselves comforted or sheltered within the veil, there is no scope of liberation for them. Nowhere does the novel hint that they wear it out of their own choice, as an acceptance to their customs. In fact, both the women are instructed to wear it by their husband, since it is “the husband’s burden” to protect the honor of his women.

In the political and social context, Rasheed can be seen as an epitome of the Puritanic Taliban rules, that appear later in the text. His instructions of not letting his women go out of the house without his company, his ideas of honor and pride regarding the woman’s body, even his violence—all are the pointers of the later Taliban rule. In fact, he “regarded the Taliban with a forgiving, affectionate kind of bemusement”. (153) He nevertheless goes out of his ways to get a television for his treasured son, Zalmai. He is pleased with the Taliban, only till it serves his nefarious dominance over his women (which it favors anyway). His branding Laila as “How urbane, how Tajik, of you.” (279) is a critical pointer in his stereotypical mentality of the Afghan chauvinism that the Taliban thoroughly promotes. (Tajiks are mostly Sunni Muslims and speak Persian). Additionally, he not only tortures the women himself, he de facto adopts the imperialistic policies of dividing the two women: “I should say Mariam will be my eyes and ears when I’m away.”(224) The notion of women policing women is an old tactic of patriarchy. He further compares his wives to cars; calling Mariam “a Volga” and Laila as “a brand-new, first-class, shiny Benz”, confirms the objectified image of the women in his mind. The boasting of his “downright charitable” nature, while offering the proposal of marriage for Laila is to be seen as

an anti-thesis to the feminist sentiments. If viewed from a Western thought, Rasheed is a misogynist.

The political scenario of the time allows men like Rasheed and Jalil to get away with their sins towards women. Jalil, Mariam's illegitimate father easily escapes leaving Nana with her bastard daughter impoverished. Though, his rare visits to Mariam are longingly cherished by her. Hosseini brings out the daughter's pining for her father and a woman's distress when she's stranded, through Miriam and Nana. Nana's 'jinn'(the evil figure that spellbonds the person, supposedly) is nothing but a neurological defect that has a cure in the medical science. Her 'jinn', perhaps, could be understood as a sign of some mental illness she got, soon after Jalil abandoned her. Hence, men like Jalil can move on with their lives splendidly indulging in polygamy. Rasheed, too, delights himself and rules over the two women, who are less than half of his age. Polygamy among men is quite accepted in Afghanistan. The Koran in fact encourages it: "If ye fear that ye shall not be able to deal justly with the orphans, marry women of your choice, two or three or four..." (Koran 4:3) Moreover, the political situations are such that "a woman needs a husband." to shelter herself from being raped or sold in prostitution or murdered. (216)

Not only post-1996 i.e. post-Taliban, did the circumstances get worse, it was already bloodied in the hands of the Mujahideen. "There was looting, murder, and increasingly, rape, which was used to intimidate civilians and reward militiamen."(253) However, as presented in the novel, there was a scope for women to grow intellectually. A Times article, a speech by Hillary Clinton suggests that women during the pre-Taliban times held important positions in various sectors. She gives an example that "nearly half the doctors, university students and teachers in Kabul were women." A fine example in Hosseini's works is the character of Sofia Akrami, Amir's mother. She reads books on Hazara people, that brings out her forward-thinking. In "A Thousand", Babi, Laila's father rightly says "it's a good time to be a woman in Afghanistan." The statement is prophetic, after all Afghan (also Kabul, for that matter) is going out to be a strangulating experience for the women during the Taliban. As seen in the novel, the nurses have to operate within the burqa, which hinders their sight. The Taliban strictly ban schooling for women and girls, also prohibit them to leave without a male relative ("maumdar"). With this, most schools for boys were also shut since the teachers were women. Thus the Taliban regime leaves the country in a dark abyss of unawareness, ignorance and illiterate generations.

While Hosseini brings forth the oppression of women in his *A Thousand Splendid Suns*, his former novel *The Kite Runner* has lesser women characters. *The Kite Runner* is more about the friction between the Hazaras and the Pashtuns. Nevertheless, the story knits the women within the fabric. Their presence is mostly absent, yet one can see the hints towards the situations in which women are located. Many critics believe the paucity of the women characters as anti-feminist or anti-women. Though, Hosseini wants the reader to see gender and caste struggles in the story. Rape is a recurrent motif in the novel. However, it happens to the Hazara men, first to Hassan and later to his son, Sohrab. Also, another rape of a woman happens when Baba and Amir are on their journey to Pakistan. There is also the element of patriarchy, reflected through the character of General Taheri. He does not allow his daughter, Jamila to sing inspite the fact she was once so famous for her voice. Jamila, too, displays the acceptance of the cultural and social limitations for her sex. Additionally, Amir boasts of going to a killing spree and Soraya would still approve of her, as every "woman needs a husband."



The author clearly brings out the gender stereotypes through Soraya's running away episode. She's seen as un-virtuous and unchaste by her clan after her return. Amir and Baba are far away from such prejudices. As Amir says "No, Soraya. Not even close. Nothing you said changes anything. I want us to marry." (77) He could say this because he was an educated Afghan living in America, had he been in Afghanistan and not well educated, things would work differently. The problem lies not in Afghan, but the scenario. Further, this novel, too, brings to light the Taliban rule and their ban on women's work. The women are thus left with no choice than watching their little ones die of starvation. The way Laila had to leave Aziza in the orphanage, likewise, this text too empathizes with the plight of the job-less women while their husbands are dead in the war, thus leaving their kids in Zaman's orphanage. Also, the novel gives an insight to the twice removed women, who are Hazara and are gendered biased too. Sanaubar, Hassan's mother is an exemplar of this idea. She is labeled as a "loose" woman, as she ran away with another man and not having maternal feelings for Hassan. It might be interpreted as she probably felt ashamed and left Hassan, thinking he will be better off without her. Sanaubar could be also studied as a self-conscious Hazara woman, who's naturally drawn towards a Pashtun i.e. Baba. Whereas for Baba, being a respectable and morally upright Pashtun did not stop him from sleeping with Sanaubar, and beget her a son, Hassan. *The Kite Runner* has lesser woman characters, nonetheless, varied and deep. More than in a feminist light, they are pictured in a humanly sense; that gives them life.

Afghan, then, becomes the land of segregations. Along with illiteracy and ignorance, the Taliban ensures the apartheid among gender. The Taliban leaders believed that if they gave women the right to be educated or any other freedom, they would lose the authority of their rank. The Taliban's rigid principles were not only the revival of the Islamic laws; it was their internal political battle. The madarassa sphere thus became a powerful symbol of manhood and a reassertion of the students' commitment to jihad. By controlling women's bodies and denying them rights of freedom, Taliban gained a false legitimacy for themselves. (Rashid,111)

Outside Hosseini's novels, there is a larger truth that needs to be addressed. It is breathtaking and numbing to know that, in the name of religion many Islamic nations practice female circumcision. They literally cut out the girls' genitals in order to prevent them from committing adultery and becoming a prostitute. Hirsi Ali describes her own genital mutilation in her book *Infidel*. She says "Then the scissors went down between my legs and the man cut off my inner labia and clitoris..." This is horrific; but it does not seem to be so for the people of Islam. As Sheikh Muhammad Sayyed Tantawi, the Grand Imam of Cairo's al-Azhar, it "is a laudable practice that [does] honor to women".(Chesler and Spenser, 8-9) Not only this, there are several Islamic nations who punish the women who are being raped. Instead of penalizing the rapist, they lash and even hang the victims. "In 2004, a sixteen-year old girl, Atefeh Rajabi, was hanged in Public Square in Iran. Her crime? She was charged with adultery – which probably means she was raped."(Chesler and Spenser, 18) However, there are women who fight this terrifying crime. Mukhtaar Mai stands as a paradigmatic figure for the revolutionary women. In 2002, a neighboring village ordered her to be gang raped for penalizing her for the alleged affair of her brother with the woman of the other tribe. She "fought against the culture of silence and shame" and demanded justice.

Interestingly, religion is used as a tool for ruling over the women of Islam women. Not only in Afghan, in fact, most of the Islamic nations treated their women even worse than slaves. Shiekh

Yousef Qaradhwari, the most famous Islamic cleric says that if a husband finds his wife not acting “accordingly”, he should first try gentle methods to tell her to rectify or “If this approach fails, it is permissible for him to beat her lightly with his hands, avoiding her face and other sensitive parts.”(Chesler and Spencer, 10) The statement is appealing to most men.

Nonetheless, the women of courage, the supporters of RAWA and their effort to fight for human rights for the women cannot be overlooked. The Revolutionary Association for Women in Afghanistan as described by Nita Prichard, “RAWA is an organization that provides fascinating insights into understanding of gender, national identity and universal human rights.” It claims to stand for the “silent majority” of the women in Afghanistan. Cheryl Bernard gives a detailed account of RAWA and their efforts. The women revolutionaries take men along to fight for the rights of women of their nation. The author says RAWA women “find husbands who aid and abet their clandestine feminist activities, who take over the housework and the child care while they are busy evacuating female refugees, who make up stories and provide cover to make sure no one will suspect that their wives are engaged in seditious independent political activities.”; therefore dissolving the gender apartheid.

Although Hosseini’s characters, especially Laila and Mariam do not emerge as political activists, they are nonetheless the embodiment of the women’s struggle in Afghan. Laila finally resumes teaching the kids. Her success is the outcome of her previous education. Had the courage and optimism of these two characters visited the women actually, it would be a new dawn everyday in Afghanistan.

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